A cabinet focused on the 'how' of government

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Body

When it comes to assembling a cabinet, a first minister can choose sweeping change or a more restrained nip-and-tuck approach.

After six years in office, our prime minister seems to understand what so many ignore: that the faces at the table are only a small part of the equation. At least as important as the names involved is the architecture they inhabit - the apparatus of government and its balance of power.

To understand the strategy behind this cabinet, we need to look past their resumes and consider how the machinery of government is being structured.

What has become clear, as Justin Trudeau starts his new mandate, is this prime minister knows his time is limited.

Therefore, he needs to focus the machinery of government toward delivering the only thing that matters: results, results, results.

This reshuffle no doubt worked back from the objective of delivering on the "build back better" agenda. The new government has been calibrated in a way that targets key election items identified by voters, namely immediate action on child care and affordable housing.

What's more, the prime minister, with historic input from Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland (or perhaps vice-versa) has clearly established a cabinet that they hope can deliver those priorities in the context of a minority Parliament.

Take housing, one of the most urgent priorities identified by Liberal voters in our own firm's post-election research project, and one the Liberals simply cannot afford to lose. Now, a whole new department has been created to tackle the demand of those voters, with Ahmed Hussen at its helm.

Much like getting a pipeline built is sacrosanct for Jason Kenney's voters, delivering on housing is imperative for this government's voters. By establishing a new ministry, Trudeau has a spokesperson for progress and a clear indicator that he is serious about major action on this important issue.

Not only does the new ministry speak volumes - so does the choice to lead it. In his two years as minister of families, children and social development, Hussen was seen as an adroit manager of child-care negotiations with the provinces. Leading that work, Hussen developed a reputation as someone who can get things done.

On the climate change file, Canadians are not sure what to make of Trudeau's government. Voters give him almost no credit for the carbon tax, and while they are passionate about fighting climate change, they struggle to understand his approach to climate action.

No matter, the prime minister has made it simple for them by appointing "Green Jesus" Steven Guilbeault as his minister of environment and climate change.

For three days after the announcement was made, headlines called out consternation in Alberta about the choice - which may be precisely the point. In the simplest way possible, Trudeau is telling his voters that they ain't seen nothing yet on climate change, even if he himself is unsure of the exact game plan.

Other moves similarly echo the sentiment of voters. Moving Mélanie Joly to foreign affairs is an apparently well-deserved promotion of one promising MP to a senior government role. (Even if voters do not care one bit about foreign policy.)

Similarly, moving the highly competent Anita Anand to defence signals that this government seriously intends to clean up the mess in that department. It's about time. No, make that overtime.

Above all, Trudeau now has women leading the three crucial ministries of finance, national defence and Global Affairs Canada, which speaks to his government's focus on equality.

At the centre of all this is heir-apparent Chrystia Freeland. It's widely known by now that Freeland's hands are all over these new cabinet appointments.

And she has shown that she understands the importance of structures, rather than people, in steering the ship of government. Given the superficial shuffles of the past five years, perhaps that view is only now rubbing off on Trudeau.

The Liberals, Trudeau and Freeland have played a deft hand with this cabinet, targeting key priorities and paving the way for new leadership. Now they just have to turn to the small matters of governing and political survival, which they might find somewhat more troublesome.

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